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ROUNDTABLE:

Carolyn Marie Souaid interviews Stephen Morrissey, Endre Farkas, and Ken Norris about the Vehicule days and beyond

Carolyn Marie Souaid: The three of you were part of the Vehicule Poets, an avant-garde group of seven poets who hung out together in Montreal in the 1970s and 80s. Part of your legacy was a reading series (circa 1973-1978) that came into being to promote contemporary poetry. Of all the readings that took place at the Vehicule Art Gallery (61 Ste-Catherine St. W.) on Sunday afternoons at 2 pm, which one(s) stand out in your mind as a highlight and/or important event? What specific details do you recall?

Stephen Morrissey: That would be Tom Konyves's "No Parking" reading; Tom read his poem accompanied by a cellist, it was brilliant, hypnotic, engaging. There were many other Sunday afternoon readings, some readings were given in the evening, and, in fact, I'm not really sure that Tom's reading was a part of the Vehicule reading series. I remember Robert Kelly, Al Purdy, and Clayton Eshleman reading, and others, but it is Tom's reading that I remember right away as an exceptional event.

Endre Farkas: Readings were important to me for a number of reasons. It let me hear what was going on at the moment in town, in Canada, and was occasionally a window to the U.S.. It was also a reason/excuse to meet and speak with other poets and connect/network. And most importantly (for me) it was transformative in thinking about what a reading is and could be.

Alan Bealy, a visual artist member of the gallery and publisher of Eldorado Editions, asked me for a reading. I agreed. I showed up early to set up and found a note on the door. "Reading cancelled." Allan didn't show. That was his reading. A conceptual non-reading. At first, I was pissed but then thought about it and really liked the idea. The audience didn't.

Another "event" reading was Opal L Nations. He read for about two hours or an eternity. He read until I was the only one left (I think). He wanted to see how far he could push the "reader" before they moved from being passive to active participants and walked out. I had to stay to close up.

The Four Horsemen's performance was engaging sound theatre. They made me feel the sound, letters, and silences that are essential to poems. They also exposed me to collaborative creation.

Then there was Michael Ondaatje's reading among the sheep legs. This was an accidental situation. A visiting visual artist had installed a gallery full of sheep legs. There was no room to

sit so the listeners had to stand among the sheep legs. I don't remember what Michael read. I just remember the environment in which he read.

And the final one was the open reading. The gallery was packed to the balcony with poets and friends. Each poet read for five minutes (not sure). At the end of their time, an egg timer went off and they had to stop, even if they were in the middle of their poem. I don't remember if they did or not. I remember Tom, Ken, Richard (Sommer), and me combining our times and reading for about twenty simultaneously. For me it was a provocation. It made me realize that "readings" were performative, a return to the oral tradition and direct engagement with the tribe, collective, and community. For me these five were the real 'Vehicule Readings.'

Ken Norris: I'm going to answer this question as an audience member, Carolyn. As a reader, there's a whole other different set of memories.

I arrived back in Montreal in January of 1975. I was the last of the Vehicules to arrive.

I am pretty sure that the first reading I attended at Vehicule Art was a reading by Robert Flanagan, a Toronto poet who was publishing with House of Anansi. He was doing a kind of minimalism that really appealed to me. But mostly I was just *taking it all in*. The space, the people, the cold. It was February, and Vehicule Art turned off the radiators on the weekends. So you had to wear your coat. It was freezing.

Next up would probably be The Four Horsemen. I *loved* what The Four Horsemen were doing. We eventually wound up doing a sound poetry album of our own: *Sounds Like*. They were great inspirers. And highly entertaining.

Al Purdy did a great reading at Vehicule in 1977 or 1978. But the reason I remember that reading is because Leonard Cohen showed up, drank coffee, and listened.

In the 1977-1978 season the organizers had money from the gallery to bring in American poets. Terry Stokes, Anne Waldman and Robert Kelly all came to read. But the reading that meant the most to me was the reading given by Kenneth Koch. To have one of the poets of the New York School come and read to us for me was a big deal. I think the way I read at readings completely changed after seeing Koch. I got *the feel* of the New York School from that reading. A few years later, John Ashbery came to Montreal and read at McGill.

The last of the readings that had the greatest significance for me was a reading by Michael Ondaatje in November of 1978. I was a big fan of *Rat Jelly*, and it was wonderful to hear those poems live.

CMS: Some of you have mentioned the impact that the most memorable readings had on you. Clearly different things rubbed off on each of you. Ken, for example, mentions the collaborative album *Sounds Like* that was inspired by hearing what The Four Horsemen were doing. I wonder if you can identify a particular detail/element you culled from one of these

readings and follow the thread into a piece/writing project that you later created— either individually or collaboratively?

EF: I don't remember the timeline but I certainly know that hearing Stephen's & Pat's (Walsh) performance of "regard as sacred" and The Four Horsemen's sound theatre encouraged my incorporation of multi-voice texts in my collaboration with dancers in *Sound Bodies*. I had a one-line poem "as the breath is the journey and it is imperceptible as is the breath just breathed in and out" which they played with at the start of the piece, in the middle, and at the end. There were definite differences as they got more tired. This line was about the breath as inspiration and expiration, as part of the life cycle. The Four Horsemen "cacophony/soundscapes" if not inspired, then liberated me to use it in the third part of *Face-Off/Mise Au Jeu*. This was a seven-voice piece that dealt with the French/English relationship in Quebec around the 1980 referendum. It reflected people talking at cross purposes at the same time and not hearing or listening to each other. It was also a bilingual piece which not only spoke of but showed in a vocal way the topic and theme. I'm not sure if my poem "Er/Words/ah" was created before or after "regard as sacred" but it certainly was in the same spirit and did appear alongside it on *Sounds Like*.

KN: I would say that having "direct contact" with two New York School poets (Koch and Ashbery) completely changed everything that I did, and how I did it. Frank O'Hara was the great inspiration, but Frank O'Hara wasn't around anymore. But his brothers-in-arms were. Ashbery's poetry has never done that much for me—but the *tonality* appealed to me. And Koch's poetry was much more in my wheelhouse, that combination of flippant and serious. A lot of my poetry has that. Hearing Kenneth Koch read was the next best thing to hearing O'Hara read. Eventually I heard tapes of O'Hara reading, but much later.

SM: Not sure that any poetry reading had this effect on my writing – "a particular detail/element you culled from one of these readings and follow the thread into a piece/writing project that you later created" – and I went to a lot of readings in the old days. What changed my writing, what was an epiphanous experience that changed what I was writing, was derived from what I was reading. But here is the thing, from going to poetry readings I learned my test of poetry, the test of poetry is when I heard someone read their poems did it make me want to write so that at least temporarily I was under the spell of that poet's work, and I would go home from their reading and I would write my own poems because that poet inspired me to write, that poet communicated the spirit of poetry, the Muse was present. This is the test of what differentiates real poetry from fake/bad poetry, does it inspire you to write, and then do you as a poet eventually find your own voice, not just copy someone else's style?

CMS: Whether inspired by the ongoing readings in the Vehicule Art Gallery or something else, all three of you published fairly early in your writing careers. How did that come about?

KN: At the age of twenty-one I was in Montreal for close to a year, doing an M.A. in English at Concordia. My thesis was all about Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. After my thesis defense, I moved back to New York, to play in my band Bogart and storm the music business.

My “return” to New York in 1973 and 1974 proved to be really quite complicated. I thought I was there to conquer the music business, but I was really there to have *the* great love affair of my life.

Neither mission turned out entirely as planned. Inside of eighteen months, I was in and out of the music business and in and out of love. Never to be quite the same person again.

But what’s relevant to what comes after this stay in New York is this: I started collaborating with visual artist Jill Smith, who was living up in Montreal.

Jill and I began a love affair during the last two months I was in Montreal in 1973. She was looking for a way to get out of an unhappy marriage, and I was the way. In the way that lovers do, we started sharing interests and enthusiasms. One day I read her a poem entitled “Sweet Potato” that I’d written in Montreal around the time of American Thanksgiving. Perhaps a week later she came over to my place with a few drawings of asparagus that she had done. And so my first book, *Vegetables*, was born.

It’s always been the common assumption that I wrote a bunch of off-beat poems about vegetables, and then Jill did the illustrations. What happened more often than not was that Jill did a drawing, and then I illustrated the drawing by writing a poem.

When I moved to New York we continued to see one another, and the project began to grow. She’d bring copies of drawings to New York when she came to see me, or I would see them in her studio on the occasions I was visiting her in Montreal. The poems and drawings circled the relationship.

It was a strange way of backing into a first book. I thought I was working as a songwriter while, over a period of about two years, I was writing the poems for my first book. Jill collected the poems and drawings and curated the project.

On a visit to New York in late 1974, Jill told me that our book had been accepted by a publisher. What book? I asked. She told me that *Vegetables* was now a book. And she told me that Vehicule Press in Montreal would be the publisher. The book came out in March, 1975 when I was still twenty-three years old. I turned twenty-four a few weeks later. By then I was living in Montreal.

EF: I had just come back to Montreal from my year and a half stay on Meatball Creek Farm Commune in the Eastern Townships because a Creative Writing MA Program had just opened up at Concordia and my undergrad professor, Richard Sommer, invited me to apply. I was

accepted. A year before my thesis (a manuscript of poems) was due, I went to Hungary for my cousin's wedding. While there, I began what became my first book *Szerbusz*. As most of my friends and some readers of my novel *Never, Again* may know, my parents and I fled Hungary during the 1956 uprising. That experience and my return became the topic and theme of my book. *Szerbusz* is a word (Latin origin) used in Hungarian as a greeting and for leave-taking. Since I had no choice about leaving nor a chance to say goodbye when we fled, I found this word appropriate. In this book, I said hello and goodbye to my birthland. On my terms. I pretty well had the manuscript finished when I came back. It was around this time that I became involved in the Véhicule world and there met Allan Bealy. He was an original member of the gallery and was also publishing DaVinci, a multidisciplinary magazine. For some reason that I don't remember, he decided to publish four chapbooks, Claudia Lapp's *Dakini*, Tom Ezzy's *Arctic Char in Grecian Waters*, Ian Ferrier's *From Yr Lover Like an Orchestra* and my *Szerbusz*. I didn't go looking to get published, it just happened because (I like to think) that it was good but also because I happened to be at the right place (Véhicule), meeting the right person at the right time. I do remember the book came out before my MA defense which caused a bit of a kerfuffle because – I didn't know – an MA thesis had to be unpublished. They finally agreed to accept it and I graduated with an unpublished and published version of *Szerbusz*.

SM: My first published poem was in our high school literary magazine and my first chapbook, co-authored with Ron Newton, was *Poems of A Period*, published in 1971. I don't remember how it came about, maybe Ron, who was a friend in high school, suggested we do a chapbook together, assuming we knew what a chapbook was, or maybe we agreed to publish some poems together for some other reason. Another high school friend, Stratos Mahmoudides, typed the poems and maybe he had it printed, all I remember is going to bookstores with Ron and asking if they would sell the book. I remember Mr. George at Argo Book Store, he took several copies and years, or decades later, they were still on a rack with other chapbooks at the rear of his store... What I find interesting about *Poems of a Period*, and I suspect this applies to other poets, is that my concerns as a poet, themes that I continue to return to even now, are in that first published work written in the late 1960s and published in 1971 when I was just beginning as a poet. The themes are family, memories of family, the ancestors, themes and concerns that are containers for emotions. Read a poet's first poems and you'll see the beginning of a poet's concerns, it's a continuum that goes from the beginning to the middle and now, for me, the last poems I am writing. And then, two years later, in 1973, I met Guy Birchard who introduced me to Artie Gold that spring, and the three of us organized the first poetry reading at Vehicule Art Gallery for June 1973. That was the same year I took a creative writing course with Richard Sommer at SGWU. And then, the next year, after I graduated from university and I was working in the library at SGWU, in the Shuchat Building, I was looking up book titles in different universities on a computer and, of course, I typed in *Poems of a Period* and there it was, at the John Robarts Library at the University of Toronto (I still have the original print-out of this), and just now, on April 30, 2022, I see *Poems of a Period* is catalogued in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. It's a lot of work being a poet, you have to begin when young if you want to get the work done. Here is a link to a facsimile of *Poems of a Period*:

<https://archive.org/details/POEMSOFAPERIODCHAPBOOKBYSTEPHENMORRISSEY/mode/2up>

CMS: The 1970s saw the proliferation of a number of oddball magazines (What is, Maker, Hh, Everyman His Own Football, CrossCountry, Mouse Eggs, etc.). Many seem to be the antithesis of what we think of when we think of a literary magazine. What were some of the magazines you were involved with and what was the idea behind them?

SM: When you're young and a poet you might want to do more than write poems, you might want to get involved with other poets, organize and give readings of your work, meet and know other poets, get in touch with other poets. The main thing, other than writing poems, is knowing other poets and being a part of a community; poets write in isolation so you want some kind of a social aspect to being a poet. That's why, in 1973, I began "what is", a folded and mailed out "magazine" of concrete poetry. There weren't a lot of concrete poets around and I wanted to be in touch with other concrete poets. I was never interested in selling "what is", I wasn't trying to make money or appeal to a general audience, that's why I mailed it to like-minded poets. I always wrote a lot but I needed an audience for this work, and I included some of my own concrete poems in "what is". There was no internet so "what is" was photocopied and mailed out, I still prefer little magazines to be printed, there is a special quality to a hard copy of a literary magazine, years later you find a copy of a poetry magazine on a bookshelf and you to get a glimpse and a feeling for when the magazine was published. A digital magazine is different, they can look very professional while poetry magazines were usually pretty amateurish affairs, but that was part of the ambience and attraction of these magazines. These old print magazines are archives of what was happening in poetry in the past, they can't go offline and instantly disappear, they aren't as ephemeral as digital magazines, and sometimes you find the first published work, sometimes the forgotten work, of a now well-known poet and that is always exciting.

EF: I agree with Stephen that writing is a solitary affair, though we (a few of the Vehicule Poets) got into collaborative writing, performing and videopoeming. I also agree that a magazine is a way to break the solitude. It's a way of meeting other people who are interested in sharing though I didn't think these thoughts when I first ventured into magazine making. I had never seen any alternative magazine, so I didn't know what it was supposed to look like or what it should have in it.

My first venture into "little magazines" (pre-Vehicule Days) was after my first or second year of university. I don't really remember how it came about or who thought about doing it or why, but I do know that I ended up being the publisher, production team, and distributor. It was called *Ostrich* (contrary to the popular myth, ostriches do not bury their head in the sand when scared or frightened. They can sense danger before other creatures and give warning). The magazine was a primitive looking mélange of poetry, prose, essays, music reviews, political analysis and some irreverent cartoons by friends and friends of friends. Our big scoop was getting in to see John Lennon and Yoko Ono when they had their bed-in at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. Lennon wrote a note congratulating us on doing our mag and even let us have one of his

poems (not very good). *Ostrich* lasted only four or five issues but it gave me a taste of having control and the freedom to do whatever I wanted because I had the means of production.

We printed about 50 copies and sold them on downtown street corners for \$0.25. I even got invited on to the local TV station's "Like Young" programme to talk about "hippies."

KN: Literary magazines can be a lot of different things. *The Malahat Review* is one kind of literary magazine, and *Mouse Eggs* is another.

The magazines I was involved with - *CrossCountry*, *Mouse Eggs*, *Everyman His Own Football* -

were all expressions of community. And they all defined "community" in different ways. *CrossCountry* applied itself to the North American poetry community. *Mouse Eggs* was mostly about the community of the seven Vehicule poets. *Everyman His Own Football* was an expression of the community of two poets: myself and Tom Konyves. There was one issue of Dada ramblings, and that was it.

CMS: In his introduction to *The Véhicule Poets anthology (Maker Press, 1979)*, Artie Gold wrote that he "would not like to see perpetuated...any mythic understanding that bonds exist between these poets greater than common sympathy arising from the shared perplexities of the Montreal english (sic) lifestyle." He went on to state, in no uncertain terms, that "Not as one, then, do we present ourselves, but, AT ONCE." Can you speak to the reasons why there was some resistance to calling yourselves a group and why, eventually, the name stuck? How did being a Vehicule poet impact your writing career?

EF: The simple reason for resistance, I think, was the fact that our art made us internally, if not externally, solitary creatures. We did our "job" alone, by ourselves. We really didn't have anyone, nor did we want to, to call on someone else to share our pleasure/pain of making. It's probably also true of creators in the other arts. So spending so much time alone, in our own country of one, we didn't easily occupy the "collective." And yet, I think we craved to be a community. Maybe this was more the case in a schizophrenic place like Montreal/Montréal.

I was more ready than some of the others to be part of a team. Maybe that was an extension of my experience and enjoyment of playing team sports. A good team consists of individuals with different strengths coming together to succeed. It also covers weaknesses and offers protection. I always liked the Gold manifesto "Not as one, but, AT ONCE." It encapsulated in a simple, precise phrase our commonality and individuality. If you read our books, you get a sense of our different, individual concerns, styles, themes and topics. So we weren't "as one." You look at our collective activities, then you see a shared "at once" reality. We were (most of us) willing to collaborate to organize readings, run presses and magazines, and participate in each other's "off the page" performances.

I think, we are more recognized as members of a group rather than as individuals. This has its blessings as well as its curse. I'm pretty sure, I wouldn't have done some of the things that I did if I had not been part of the Vehicule Poets.

Ken, I leave the history of our moniker to you.

KN: Whatever quibbles or reservations Artie had I didn't have.

I have always said that "the Vehicule Poets" could have just as easily been called The Artie Gold Fan Club. We were all fans of Artie's poetry, including Artie.

But the gallery and the reading series made us "AT ONCE." We were all there, and we were all there together.

Did being a Vehicule Poet "impact my writing career"? I have never thought in careers, so maybe there is that. I probably thought more in terms of "a community of creativity." There was always someone to show my work to that wasn't critics or readers—it was peers. I think that's a pretty significant gift.

SM: When we decided to present ourselves as a group, at a meeting at Artie Gold's home in February 1979, Artie Gold, Claudia Lapp, and I were opposed to the idea; we questioned the basis on which the group was being formed, some of us reasoned that we were individual poets, not a group, and we didn't need to be a group to organize poetry readings at Vehicule Art Gallery. Of course, poets are still individuals even if they belong to a group. At this time Ken was working on his Ph.D. at McGill, with Louis Dudek, and Ken must have seen the advantages of being in a group, he had greater long term vision than the rest of us, he also had historical perspective. Looking back on it, Claudia and I were right to hesitate but we were also right to agree to the group idea; Artie agreed but only if he could write the introduction to *The Vehicule Poets* (1979), an anthology of our work. It's not uncommon in Montreal for poets to gather in groups, the Montreal Group in the 1920s, the Preview and First Statement poets in the 1940s, and others. There was also the precedent of the TISH poets in Vancouver, we had invited several TISH poets to read at the gallery. As a group we are part of a continuum that has historical meaning and relevance. Groups have to form organically, they form from the conditions in which the members of the group find themselves, and groups can be based on different things. The Vehicule Poets were based on an openness to creative expression; inclusion and not exclusion; contemporary Canadian and American poetry; organizing poetry readings at Vehicule Art Gallery; friendship that has lasted almost fifty years; and occasionally publishing work together.

CMS: I'd like to follow up on Stephen's final point that some of the glue that held the Vehicule Poets together involved "publishing work together." What feelings, if any, come up for you given that you are now, in 2022, bringing out and launching books together for the

first time since 1978? Is there any residual nostalgia for the past? Does this occasion spark ideas or an interest in any future collaborations?

SM: You never know what will happen in the future; who could have imagined what we'd be doing in 2022 back in 1975, or even in 2010? Launching these three books together is a bit of a surprise, I didn't know about Ken's Ekstasis book until a few months ago and I learned of Andre's book after that. Richard Olafson, the founder and publisher of Ekstasis Editions, tells the story of living on Saturna Island, one of the Gulf Islands, back in 1982 and that my wife Carolyn Zonailo gave a reading that inspired Richard to begin Ekstasis Editions. Carolyn is Richard's hero but Richard is our hero! One thing leads to another, we build on the past. Richard has excelled at publishing translations of French Canadian writers into English as well as publishing English-speaking Montreal poets. Carolyn always says that Richard is a saint, to have published continuously for forty years despite the vicissitudes of the publishing industry is a real achievement. Richard Olafson is what a good publisher should be, someone who takes chances, who has vision, and who gives writers an opportunity to publish their work. About any future Vehicule poets' collaborations, that will happen if the opportunity presents itself and no one knows what the future holds.

KN: Back in 1978 we all published books with Vehicule Press. It was *The Trees of Unknowing* for Stephen, *The Perfect Accident* for me, and the second printing of *Murders in the Welcome Café* for Andre. We were all in our twenties.

Now we are in our seventies, and we all have books out with Ekstasis Editions. We've been friends and "poetry pals" for close to fifty years.

That it's "all come round again" exceeds the bounds and parameters of nostalgia. In a way, it completes the journey.

EF: Serendipity is all. What are the odds that three young men, one born in the Bronx (New York), one in NDG (Montreal) and one in Hajdunánás (Hungary) would be turned on to poetry, end up, at once, in Montreal at Vehicule Art Gallery, meet, like each other and publish at the same time? Once in 1978 and once, 47 years later. Serendipity, such a strange word, coined by Horace Walpole after coming upon it in an ancient Persian fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendipity*. The meaning of the word, "good luck in finding valuable things unintentionally," refers to the fairy tale characters who were always making discoveries through chance. Sounds like the Vehicule Poets to me.